

# Correlation between Universal Ethic and Business Ethics – Explorations from the Perspective of Hans Küng’s Global Ethic

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## ABSTRACT

*If most of us accept the above idea, then it means there are certain rights and obligations between corporations and the general public. Donaldson and Dunfee (1985) pointed out that a form of “social contract” is hidden in corporations’ social responsibilities and discussed business ethics through this topic. However, since it is the era of globalization, corporations are not only burdened with social and moral responsibilities from just one country but many. Therefore, business ethics is destined to face the problem of diversification, and corporations will face the challenge of signing world social contract. Regarding this issue of how business ethics can be established based on social contract, Donaldson & Dunfee (1999) pointed out that Hans Küng’s world ethic theory can serve as the source of macrosocial contract that in turn serves as the basis of universal business ethics. Does this suggest that Hans Küng’s world ethic can answer the above-mentioned question regarding the problem of diversity and the challenge of world social contract faced by corporate ethic? Hans Küng’s global ethic that looks for a common ethical ground among different religions and cultures helps us achieve a path with less controversies in the diverse and opposing international business ethics. More importantly, the four principles in Hans Küng’s global ethic that look for the common ethic among different religions and cultures allow us to re-think how corporations’ social responsibilities and how the social contract between corporations and the society should be signed and manifested.*

**Keywords:** *Universal Ethic; Business Ethics; Hans Küng; global ethic; Social Contract*

## INTRODUCTION – UNIVERSAL ETHIC AND BUSINESS ETHICS

When we look for business ethics based on universal consensus, exactly what kind of content should this kind of business ethics have? How do we prove it? These are certainly interesting questions since ethic varies in different regions and cultures and is affected by history, tradition, and educational systems. At the first glance, it is hard to imagine that a common ethic can be found in different races, cultures, religions, life styles, social models, and economic systems (Küng, 1998:81-85).

Even so, scholars are still trying to look for a set of common and effective business ethics. For example, in “Business Ethics” by R. T. De George (1999) that is commonly used in many management and business schools in Taiwan, the author stresses that the American corporations he talks about in the book are based on value and principle of personal freedom, and business ethics is interpreted as the social responsibilities under such socioeconomic system. De George explains that because corporations are a part of the society, and the limitations and requirements placed upon corporations by the society are usually about morality, thus corporations’ social responsibilities are the core topic of business ethics (De George, 1999:11-16)<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, from the perspective of social responsibilities, De George believes that most of us accept the idea that the existence of corporations come with some sort of social responsibilities.

If most of us accept the above idea, then it means there are certain rights and obligations between corporations and the general public. Donaldson and Dunfee (1985) pointed out that a form of “social contract” is hidden in corporations’ social responsibilities and discussed business ethics through this topic. (Donaldson & Dunfee,

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<sup>1</sup> De George. (1999). *Business Ethics*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. p. 11-16. The emphasis on personal freedom by De George is to freely choose one’s own values in the system without violating others’ rights. The value is evaluated based on the effects of actual behaviors and coordinates with the principle of efficiency.

1985:85-112). However, since it is the era of globalization, corporations are not only burdened with social and moral responsibilities from just one country but many. Therefore, business ethics is destined to face the problem of diversification, and corporations will face the challenge of signing world social contract (De George, 1999:39, and Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999:88-89, and Küng, 1998:104)<sup>2</sup>. In other words, these scholars obviously tried to base common business ethical regulations on the idea of social contract.

However, can the above-mentioned “social contract” take root in the duties and obligations that we agree should be taken up by corporations or business owners? Regarding this issue of how business ethics can be established based on social contract, Donaldson & Dunfee (1999) pointed out that Hans Küng’s global ethic theory can serve as the source of macrosocial contract that in turn serves as the basis of universal business ethics. Does this suggest that Hans Küng’s global ethic can answer the above-mentioned question regarding the problem of diversity and the challenge of world social contract faced by business ethics? This is why our research is interested in Hans Küng’s global ethic theory.

### **Universal Ethic and Hans Küng’s Global Ethic**

Hans Küng’s philosophy is rooted in the concept of “every human being must be treated humanely” and from which he proposed the concept of “global ethic.” Hans Küng expanded Huntington’s idea of seeking inter-civilization commonalities and Walzer’s fundamental ethical standards into the principle of global ethic and the four necessary principles that seek a common set of ethical standards between different religions and cultures. It also seems that he tries to interpret global ethic and the four principles as a global social contract since he has worked hard to determine common beliefs among different religions and cultures. For example, he stresses that the Confucianist spirit of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” can also be found in other oriental or Western ethic that appear different at the first glance (Küng, 1998:80-85, 105-111, and Chen, 2000:158-159)<sup>3</sup>. To a certain degree, this kind of concept allows us to discover common ethical values when facing diverse international business ethics. In other words, Hans Küng attempted to look for common values among different cultures in order to show the world that these are social contracts that all people would agree upon.

On the other hand, although ethical principles such as justice, respect, mercy and honesty are ancient and fundamental values (Küng, 1998:253-254), Hans Küng has not only proposed that ethic are desperately needed in today’s capitalist world – democratic or market economy, but he has also returned the above-mentioned ethic to the spirit of “every human being must be treated humanely.” More importantly, Hans Küng has successfully found commonalities among different oriental and Western religions, cultures, and ethical traditions. For example, he has found the Confucian spirit of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” in many religions around the world (Küng, 1998:87-89, and Küng & Kuschel, 1993:157-169)<sup>4</sup>. The global ethical standards formulated on this principle not

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<sup>2</sup> De George mentioned that the moral judgment of “right and wrong” is based on culture, thus it is impossible to conduct cross-cultural evaluation of morality. De George pointed out that there are those who support and against abortion the U.S., and that the ancient Greeks did not believe infanticide was immoral. The fact that most of today’s societies believe abortion is immoral is more than enough to show how corporate ethics is challenged in different cultures. Please refer to De George. (1999). *Business Ethics*. p.39. and T. Donaldson & T. Dunfee. (1999). *A Social Contract Approach to Business Ethics*, Cambridge(Mass.): Harvard Business School press. p.88-89. Also, Hans Küng used the German word “Weltgesellschaft” to represent “global society.” Please see Hans Küng. (1998). p.104.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Küng.(1998). pp.80-85 and pp. 105-111.

There are different ways of how Hans Küng’s name was translated into Chinese. However, according to Prof. Ze-min Chen, Hans Küng once told him, in person, that “Kong Han-si” was his Chinese name, and it was used in the Chinese version of “Chinese Religions and Western Theology,” co-authored by Hans Küng and Jia-yi Qin. See: Chen, Z. (2000). “Hans Küng – Pioneer of Universal Theology,” excerpts from “Between Eternity and Reality” by Wei-xun Fu. Taipei: Cheng-chung. Pp. 158-159.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Küng .(1998). p. 87-89. and Hans Küng & Karl- Josef Kuschel. (1993). *A Global Ethic— The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions*. London: SCM Press. p.157-169. Using the golden rule of humanity, Hans Küng explained there are the following commonality between different religions and cultures:

Confucius: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” —The Analects of Confucius (Yanyuan 12; Wei-ling-gong 15)  
Rabbi Hillel: “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor.” —(Shabbat 31a)

only avoids the problem of not being able to determine the source of business ethics but also can solve ethic-related predicaments faced by international corporations with its “commonness.”

As discussed earlier, Hans Küng’s global ethic that looks for a common ethical ground among different religions and cultures helps us achieve a path with less controversies in the diverse and opposing international business ethics. More importantly, the four principles in Hans Küng’s global ethic that look for the common ethic among different religions and cultures allow us to re-think how corporations’ social responsibilities and how the social contract between corporations and the society should be signed and manifested. Many scholars study Hans Küng’s global ethic and acknowledge the importance of universal ethic in today’s globalized world. Tseng (2003) believes Hans Küng has three roles: theologian, scholar of religion, and scholar of ethic, and believes his philosophies are a product of his explorations into issues such as the doctrine of church, Ecumenism, Ecumenical Movement, Catholic/religious dialogues, and global ethic ( Zeng, 2003:XX ). Chen (1991) refers to Hans Küng’s process of going from Christianity to religious dialogues and universalism as the pioneer of universal theology (Chen, 2000:155-157). Ho (1997) believes that the content of Hans Küng’s global ethic is developed from the minimum common ethic among different religions in the world ( Küng & Kuschel, 1997:2). Therefore, Kogen (1999) agrees with Hans Küng’s approach of seeking common ethic from the “golden rule” since it is impossible to use one single culture to determine the absolute image of mankind (Kogan, 1999:105-108).

Mitra (1999) believes that the spirit of Hans Küng’s global ethic matches with the concept of “unity in plurality” in Hinduism (Mitra, 1999:172-178). Li (2003) highly acknowledges Hans Küng’s emphasis that there are universal and ultimate ethical orders and moral consensus that go beyond all differences, and believes that Hans Küng’s work has inspired his proposal of universal humanism (Li, 2003:383-388). Chang (2001) acknowledges Hans Küng’s global ethic since it manifests a form of feasibility that can be reflected in the attitude of caring for the world and avoids being isolated in a certain ethical system (Chang, 2001:155-156). Ho (2000) agrees with how Hans Küng’s global ethic believes ethic can be determined through logic, experience, and history since Ho believes the social traditions and doctrines that are tested for eras can also help us understand the structure of global ethic through the universal principles (Ho, 2002:105-130).

### **Re-thinking Hans Küng’s Global Ethic**

On the other hand, there are many discussions on how Hans Küng’s global ethic can be made richer or joined with other ideas. In terms of feasibility, George (1996) and Kuschel (1990) both stressed that we should think about how to apply Hans Küng’s global ethic on international politics and laws in order to make the last two more feasible ( Kuschel, 1990:95-101, and George, 1996:359-382). From mankind’s relationship with the world, the basis of mankind’s moral behaviors, and the motive behind moral practices, Yu (2004) addressed how Hans Küng’s global ethic can be made more complete in terms of feasibility (Yu, 2004:124-125). From the idea of “nirvana” and the world in Korean Buddhism, Chung (1999) acknowledges how Hans Küng’s global ethic and religious dialogues can create a heaven on earth (Chung, 1999:179-191). Duran (1999) also believes the school of Suifism in Islam is full of the spirit of religious dialogue since Muhammad’s original intention was not to start a whole new religion. Therefore, in its essence, Hans Küng’s global ethic should be able to be accepted by Muslims (Duran, 1999:119-130).

As for the discussions on the methodologies of Hans Küng’s global ethic, Kollek (1996) agrees with how Hans Küng seeks minimum common basis from different religions and cultures (Kollek, 1996:81-88). Sommaruga (1996) also agrees with the spirit of humanism laid by Hans Küng when constructing his global ethic; Sommaruga believes the basis for dialogues in human societies is the acknowledgment of human dignity and rights (Sommaruga, 1996:54-56). Victoria (1999) pointed that Buddhist “Zen” does not have written doctrines since it is a state of mind, and Hans Küng’s

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Jesus Christ: “As you would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.” — (Mathew 7:12; Luke 6:31)

Islam: “Direct me to an act which, if I do it, will cause Allah to love me and people to love me.” — (Forty Hadith of an Nawawi,31)

Jainism: “A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.”— (Sutrakritanga I,11,33)

Buddhism: “A state which is not pleasant or enjoyable for me will also not be so for him.”— (Samyutta Nikaya V,353.35—342.2)

Hinduism: ‘One should not behave towards others in a way which is unpleasant for oneself: that is the essence of morality.’ - (Mahabharata XIII, 114, 8)

global ethic is more acknowledged when there are no restrictions from doctrines (Victoria, 1999:192-203). Shaeffer (1998) believes that the concept of global ethic already exists among Catholic's church Fathers; Hans Küng's global ethic can even be found in the declaration of peace announced by Pope John Paul II (Shaeffer, 1998:3-5).

There are also many scholars who commented on how the methodologies of Hans Küng's global ethic can be made more complete. Dietze (1998) questioned how Hans Küng used the paradigm theory to deal with religious and cultural issues due to the incommensurability of paradigms, and suggested that Hans Küng should comment on whether comparisons that go beyond the paradigm can be made or on what standards should different paradigms be evaluated and compared (Dietze, 1998:65). Zhao (1997) views Hans Küng's global ethic as in the domain of traditional ethic and believes that "applied ethic" that show relevant ethical regulations of unique behaviors is the contemporary approach. In addition, Zhao also believes that global ethic can only work on atheists who are willing to comply and cannot be implemented mandatorily. Further, also from the perspective of paradigm theory, Zhao questions Hans Küng's approach of establishing River System out of global religions (Chao, 1997:12-20).

From the perspective of procedural ethic and communicative ethic, Robinson (1996) proposed that when forming global ethic, the procedures for allowing equal dialogues are listening, sharing, and participation (Robinson, 1996:42-45). Liu (2006) believes that when creating global ethic using induction, Hans Küng should avoid the trap of ignoring the difference, while drawing the similarity. Therefore, Liu proposed Zhu Xi's idea of "One Principle – Multiple Implementations" and "the moon shines upon all rivers." Liu also agrees with how Hans Küng believes that "humanity" is Confucius' concept of "benevolence" (Liu, 2006:110-111). From the perspective of cultural universality and uniqueness, Gu (2002) believes that a unique part of humanity is the aspect of understanding the uniqueness of culture; basis of humanity in cultural universality is a natural attribute in humanity, and the basis of humanity in cultural uniqueness is the social attribute in humanity, thus Gu does not agree how Hans Küng interprets the universality of culture as the common quality in the eternal existence of different cultures (Gu, 2002:212-131). Chi (2003) treats Hans Küng's global ethic and Rawls' political liberalism as two universalisms that deserve our attention. Although both of them are based on minimum ethic, they are different in terms of the logics. They believe the cross dialectic of universal religions and humanity – especially religions' ultimate care for humanity, is the ultimate care of world peace (Chi, 2003:29-34).

Griffin (2007) agrees with Hans Küng's proposal of solving global problems with global ethic, but this kind of concept is the opposite of nihilism that constitutes the modern world view. In the traditional world view of theism, the followers believe their religions can inspire their minds without a problem, thus they cannot eliminate non-unique moral doctrines. Therefore, Griffin proposes that the philosophical basis of global ethic should be based on Whitehead's theory of creativity, and the interactions between God and creation forms the unique ethic in human societies as well as the universal global ethic (Griffin, 2007:27-40). From the traditional concept of "benevolence" and the five virtues (benevolence, righteousness, manners, wisdom, and honesty) in Confucianism, Chao (2004) believes these doctrines help a person transform from the inner attitude and hopes such idea can complement the idea of inner restriction in Hans Küng's global ethic. Chao acknowledges Hans Küng's approach of seeking a common value from different religions and cultures, but also points out its lack of strong sense of constraint (Chao, 2004:191-203).

Zhao (1999) has proposed that Confucian's care for society and Taoist's care for nature can also serve as invaluable global spirits, and mutual understanding and dialogues between different cultures and traditions help construct global ethic (Zhao, 1999:145-153). Although Momen (1999) believes Hans Küng's global ethic has reserved a space for Western liberalism, he also agrees that many concepts in global ethic match with the doctrines and spirit of Baha'i. However, Momen believes Hans Küng's global ethic has failed to be established on the basis of metaphysics and transcendentality, and questions Hans Küng's method of induction (Momen, 1999:131-144). From the perspective of universalism, Paul (2002) thinks about global ethic and proposes that mankind's rational debate on life goals and topics would arrive at regulative concepts that support humanism. Under such concept, Chinese philosophy can also infer the human rights and dignity seen in Western cultures (Paul, 2002:67-82).

Pohl (2002) treats Confucianism as a perceptual universalism, whereas the rational universalism represents Western philosophies. In addition, he believes morality needs to have its local basis, thus it needs to be unique. The universality and local uniqueness of morality do not go against each other but complement each other. This is why he

agrees with using the unity perspective of “unity in plurality” to re-think Hans Küng’s global ethic and the cross-cultural dialogues between the oriental and Western world (Pohl, 2002:83-103). Gao (2002) acknowledges Liu’s proposal of using “One Principle - Multiple Implementations” as the basis for Hans Küng’s global ethic. Also, he believes Hans Küng is looking for a feasible, rational basis for global ethic and should not be criticized for insufficient ethical basis. The spirit of Hans Küng’s global ethic is about the awareness of life and self-perception of values rather than a detailed blue print for construction. Lastly, he believes by detoxifying and treating each individual culture, universal ethic can be indirectly made possible (Gao, 2002:99-123). Ye (1996) mentioned that when discussing universal ethical values, different models are required to acquire rational material in human/cultural resources in order to interpret “goodness,” reach a balance between self-discipline and disciplining others, and seek the meaning of universalism during the process of returning to the “self” (Ye, 1996:229-231).

### **Enlightenment on Corporate Ethic by Hans Küng’s Global Ethic**

Regarding the topic of personal ethical issues and business ethics, Drucker (1974) believes the primary ethic is honesty – no one is allowed to derail from daily ethical regulations due to job or work. Therefore, business ethics and personal ethic are the same. Another important ethical obligation is “Primum Non Nocere” (Drucker, 1993:366-368). Extending from Drucker’s idea that personal and business ethics are the same, Wu (2000) used the popular Buddhist perspective to examine contemporary business ethics and believes that the concept of equality and mercy based on the teaching of “Being pure in nature, enlightenment is the path through which we reach the state of Zen.” matches with rules such as corporate honesty, product safety and obligations, and equal competition in today’s business ethics. Buddhist activities such as altruism, donation, and educating the public also match with things in business ethics such as giving back to the society, formulating moral obligations, and moral training (Wu, 2000:83-99).

Examining business ethics from Confucianism, Sun (2004) borrows the 6<sup>th</sup> virtue (group-individual ethic) taught by Li Guo-ding and uses it as the source of regulations in business ethics. He pointed out that in the five virtues of Confucianism, the relationship between an individual and another person is mutually benefiting, but there are no direct mutually benefiting relationships between the two people and the general public. Therefore, the traditional five virtues are “personal virtues” whereas the 6<sup>th</sup> one is a “public virtue,” and business ethics serves as the entry point for a full focus on group-individual ethic (Sun, 2004: 193-206). From the perspective of universal ethic, Rothlin (2004) established international business ethics theory, adopted the Chinese Confucian to complement Western philosophies, and established the 18 international business ethics rules under the premise of acknowledging ethic diversity. Because he believes each culture has a common ethical basis, he attempted to come up with a set of philosophical principles that can be applied in all cultures that serves as the source of international business ethics (Luo, 2004:3, 14).

When discussing the principles of business ethics, Hans Küng (1998) used the universal values such as basic human dignity in “An Interfaith Declaration -- A Code of Ethic on International Business for Christians, Muslims and Jews, London, 1993” and “The Caux Round table, Principles For Business, 1994” to support his proposals in the declaration of global ethic. Further, from the perspective of ethical leadership of corporate leaders, Hans Küng proposed the characteristics of a brilliant entrepreneur that are a transformation of eternal ethical values (global ethic) in human societies into specific actions and corporate decisions (Küng, 1998:251-253, 274-275).

Donaldson and Dunfee (1999) examined the inevitable positive and negative impacts brought upon the society by corporate production and marketing and believed that a set of social contract that regulates these impacts should be proposed that serves as the basis for constructing business ethics. This kind of contract should cover all stakeholders related to an enterprise; therefore, the two scholars proposed the “Integrative Social Contracts Theory” (ISCT) in which the social contract includes the macro-social and micro-social contract. When contemplating on the business ethics rules that are suitable for the macro-social contract, the two scholars used the universal human values and joint protocols proposed by major international organizations as the main source for the macro-social contract. Hans Küng is not only one of the philosophers deemed by the two scholars as the source of business ethics but whose declaration of global ethic signed by the Parliament of World Religions is also deemed as an important source (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999:42-52, 69-73).

After examining the theories of social contract proposed by Hobbs, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls, and Lin Li, Lin (2007) also attempted to determine what should be the content of a social contract between a corporation and the society from the perspective of corporations' social obligations. Lin agrees with how Donaldson and Dunfee used Hans Küng's global ethic as a source for integrating social contracts (which are actually hypernorm) and use it as a way to establish business ethics; Lin also pointed out that Hans Küng himself is a believer of the theory of social contract (Lin, 2007:38-45).

## CONCLUSION

From the above discussions, we understand that Hans Küng's proposal of global ethic has received much attention, indicating the universal ethic in his global ethic are important and allows people of different backgrounds and religions to discover aspects that are similar or congruent with Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Zen, Catholic, Confucianism, Taoism, and Humanism. In addition, most of the previous studies focused on how Hans Küng's global ethic is common, universal, transcendental, ultimate, and feasible, and acknowledged the spirit of humanism and religious dialogues in global ethic. However, they did not discuss the fact that the concept of Christianity indigenization implied by global ethic that Hans Küng wishes to serve as the ethical codes for global politics and economy. In order to address this issue, future studies could discuss and elaborate on the concept of Christianity indigenization.

Due to different methodologies for seeking universal ethic, many of the above-mentioned researchers provided comments and additional material from perspectives such as the paradigm theory, the communication theory, creationism, universalism, liberalism, limitations of the method of induction, and unity in plurality in order to make Hans Küng's global ethic more feasible. Their focus was also on how to integrate the content of global ethic, international politics, and international laws, and using the Confucian idea of inner discipline as a way to actualize the idea of inner restraint in global ethic. However, not many of their studies addressed the feasibility of global ethic from the perspective of social contract, except Donaldson & Dunfee (1999) who treated Hans Küng's ideas and his declaration of global ethic (announced in the Parliament of World Religions in 1999) as a source for integrating the theory of social contract. These two scholars, however, have not examined the implications of global social contract that is a part of Hans Küng's global ethic from the perspective of methodology, and this is something that future researchers can work on. Drucker (1993) believes that business ethics and personal ethic are the same thing (Drucker, 1993:366-368), thus many scholars did not deliberately separate Hans Küng's global ethic from personal or business ethics during discussions. However, there are still quite a few scholars who discussed Hans Küng's global ethic or the concept of universal ethic together with business ethics. Donaldson & Dunfee (1999) and Lin (2007) constructed business ethics via social contract and treated Hans Küng's global ethic as a regulative norm for business ethics by combining global ethic and business ethics (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999:42-52, 69-73, and Lin, 2007:38-45). This kind of discussions allows us to re-examine the relationships between universal ethic, business ethics, and Hans Küng's global ethic and realize their academic implications.

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